**Kulwinder Kaur**

# CANON, MODERNITY AND PRACTICE OF *RAHIT* IN DEFINING SIKH IDENTITY

## Introduction

The scholarly response to the question of Sikh identity is fairly heterogeneous within Sikh Studies. There is also a considerable debate about the time period within Sikh history when Sikhism as a religion marked its own separation from other existing religions, faiths, and Bhakti movements so as to define itself as a distinct community of believers. The Sikh Studies also reflect varied positions on the degree of distinctiveness, flexibility and coherence within the Sikh community. The sociological response to conceptually distinguish between Sikhism as a religion with its own distinctive ideology and Sikhs as a community embedded in larger Panjabi society has refined the debate within Sikh Studies about Sikh culture, polity, and identity. To a novice, it may be quite confusing to make sense of the multiplicities of typologies such as *Nanak-Panthis, khalsa* (Oberoi,1997[1994]), *amritdhari, sehajdhari, keshdharis* (McLeod,1989), *ichadharis, bikhdharis* (Singh, 2004), *mona* (Singh, 2000) *and patit* (Judge and Kaur, 2010), etc., that are used to refer to Sikhs. In this paper I revisit this question of Sikh identity from two standpoints. Firstly, drawing from the growing body of literature in Sikh Studies I attempt to outline briefly the formation and crystallization of Sikhism as a distinct religion having a well-defined ideology and its response to modernity. Secondly, I take an empirical look at the significance of everyday practice of *Sikh Rehat Maryada* (code of conduct) amongst Sikhs to validate their claims of being Sikhs. Based on my research findings, I support the arguments that contend the monolithic tradition in favour of a pluralist base of Sikh identity. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section shows the historical processes of the formation of a separate Sikh identity till the first quarter of the twentieth century. The second section looks at the philosophical foundations of *Sikh Rahit Maryada* and its practice amongst Sikhs. The final section analyses the questions of Sikh identity in the backdrop of its attempts at grappling with modernity.

KULWINDER KAUR, Department of Sociology, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

Sri Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji Elibrary NamdhariElibrary@gmail.com

## I

On my visit to Amritsar in the month of October, 2015 I got stuck on the highway as the road was blocked and protestors were sitting on *dharna* during a state-wide *bandh* call to protest the de-sacralisation of the Sikh Scripture[1] in certain villages of Punjab following a political controversy. Amritsar was at the heart of this controversy which was triggered when the Akal Takht (the supreme temporal authority of the Sikhs) sanctioned pardon to the head of *Dera Saccha Sauda* (a non-profit socio-religious organisation) in a blasphemy case [2]. Allegedly, the pardon was sanctioned at the behest of Shiromani Akai Dal (SAD) to capture the votes of followers of *Dera* in the forthcoming assembly polls of 2017. This episode simultaneously challenged and upheld the inviolability of Sikh canon and ideology as evinced in the sacrosanctity of '*Adi Granth* as Guru'; in the principle of *Miri-Piri* that vests authority in Akal Takht; in the credibility of Five Sikh Symbols; and in the centrality of *Sikh Rehat Maryada*. Since the very beginning, Guru Nanak institutionalised the legacy of appointing a successor as Guru that continued till the death of the tenth Guru Gobind who established the Sikh scripture as the last Guru to be revered as the living embodiment of all Gurus. As per this final decree, Sikhs across the globe pay their obeisance to the *Adi Granth* as their only Guru. Yet, the instances of certain individuals who posited themselves as Gurus of the Sikh community and assume leadership in both spiritual and temporal matters have not been uncommon. It is well known that Dalit Sikhs constitute majority of the followers of such leadership due to their exclusion from the affairs of formal religious organisation. The recent incident such as that of *Dera Sacha Sauda*'s head's Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh self-avowed leadership of the Sikh *panth* (community) is not the first one. Prior to *Dera Sacha Sauda,* Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindrawalan, too, harboured such ambitions as is well known. These attempts at leadership are critiqued unequivocally by radicals and liberals alike given the sovereignty of the *Adi Granth* as the last and final Guru of the Sikhs. But when it comes to the question of the *kes*, the radicals and liberals seem to hold quite disparate views. For instance, in the past few years, the question of Sikh identity has again assumed significance because uniformity in form and appearance have become the dominant markers of identification rather than the reading of the holy Sikh scripture and observance of important spiritually uplifting tenets of *rahit* such as listening to *kirtan* in the company of *sangat* or the practice of *nam-simran.* In the process, Sikh identity has become a function of the most important sacred symbol, i.e. *Kes* (unshorn hair) to the exclusion of all else. Referring to the controversy about SGPC's decision to cancel the admission of children of non-*keshdhari* parents, to Medical Colleges, Judge (2010: 347) rightly observes

> The recent controversy has thus created a situation wherein, in the process of defining the Sehajdhari Sikh, the Sikh establishment and the intelligentsia have tried to redefine 'Sikh' solely in terms of form and appearance manifested through keeping unshorn hair. It is clear that the Khalsa identity, regarded

Sri Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji Elibrary NamdhariElibrary@gmail.com

> as synonymous with the Amritdhari (baptised) Sikh within the Sikh tradition, has not only been clearly delineated, defined, and imposed, but is also non-negotiable. There are now three bases of Sikh identity, namely, Amritdhari, Keshdhari, and Sehajdhari. If any person claiming to be a Sikh does not qualify himself as belonging to one of these identities, he may be called *patit*, which literally means impure/polluted.

In this atmosphere of intolerance, the ensuing violence and backlash invited by sacrilege of the holy book seemed inevitable. It is a different matter altogether that Sikhs observe many practices in their daily life that also amount to apostasy from a purist radical epistemology. The disjuncture between ideology and practice in the everyday life of Sikhs, therefore offers a significant scholarly prototype to analyse the recurring debate over the question: "*who is a Sikh*?"

**Sikh identity in a historical context: Boundaries and transgression**

The Sikh identity is a key theme of debates within the two opposing traditions of scholarship, i.e. the western Sikh Studies and the Sikh Studies from Punjab. Two scholars, McLeod and Oberoi have especially been at the receiving end of a strongly acrimonious critique from scholars in the local universities in Punjab. While the western Sikhs are a product of rational intellectual tradition and practice 'methodological atheism', the scholars from Punjab are largely devout Sikhs themselves and come from a pious tradition and draw their interpretation from the holy granth[3]. A number of other western but Indian scholars such as Harjot Oberoi and Pashaura Singh who have studied abroad and are located in the departments of Sikh Studies' Chairs or South Asian Studies in either Canada, USA and UK have refined and extended his work by combining the historical and textual/scriptural tradition albeit they do have differences with McLeod over many issues related to Sikhism. I, at the very outset, want to admit that I am more convinced by the arguments of western scholars than by their critics even though I happen to come from Punjab. J.S. Grewal offers a balanced review of the two traditions and my understanding of this debate is heavily borrowed from him (Grewal, 2011). However, I advocate that Sikh Studies also give due credence to the empirical tradition in addition to the currently dominant historical and textual traditions in understanding the ways Sikhism is evolving and adapting to challenges posed by modernity and globalisation. My analysis of Sikh identity in the late twentieth century is based on my empirical insights arrived at during my doctoral work in the late nineties and subsequent observations and research.

McLeod enjoys a special status in Sikh Studies as he was the first one to offer an analysis of the problem of Sikh identity from a historical perspective in his hotly contested book, "*Who is a Sikh*?" McLeod maintains that followers of Guru Nanak, known as Nanak-Panthis professed a distinct belief system, modes of worship, and ideology. Guru Nanak established the institution of *nam-simran* (meditation), *sangat, langar*, and *dharamshala* (a place of

Sri Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji Elibrary NamdhariElibrary@gmail.com

gathering of the Nanak-Panthis akin to that of Hindus and Muslims who had their temple and mosque respectively). The process of drawing boundaries had begun during the time of Guru Nanak but emergence of sharp identities was to happen later. In effect, Nanak-Panthis were a growing community of believers but did not yet possess a separate religious identity. The later Gurus adopted 'a policy of both innovation and preservation…they met the challenge of religious pluralism of the sixteenth century by establishing a clear basis for a distinct Sikh identity' (Singh, 2004: 80). They added a scriptural tradition with the writing of the Adi Granth, built the sacred Harimandir, developed the tradition of pilgrimage by digging *baolis* (wells with steps), *masand* system, *miri-piri,* and *gurmat.* However, they did not differ markedly with the early tradition of the Panth. Harjot Oberoi in his famous work "The Construction of Religious Boundaries" (1994[ 1997]) argues that it was in the early Singh Sabha period of late nineteenth and early twentieth century that we see the crystallisation of a separate Sikh identity with a distinct ritualistic code. He presents ample evidence to conclude that till the late nineteenth century, it was difficult to distinguish Sikhs from Hindus as 'the semiotic, cultural, affective and territorial universe of the Sikhs and Hindus was virtually identical'.[4] The Sikh religion was quite pluralistic, heterogeneous and diverse since 'in the absence of a centralised church and an attendant religious hierarchy, heterogeneity in religious beliefs, plurality of rituals, and diversity of life styles were freely acknowledged. There was therefore, no single Sikh identity, rather, there were multiple identities based on *Udasi, Nirmala, Sangatshahi, Jitmali, Bakhatmali, Suthreshahi, Nihashahi, Sahajdhari, Khalsa, Kuka* or *Sarwaria* following. The fluid nature of Hindu and Sikh categories, according to Oberoi (1994) could be attributed to the common cultural code and *rites de passage.* He gives a very detailed account of these shared lifecycle rituals of birth, death and marriage to illustrate the convergence between these two communities. In fact, the *Sikh Reht Maryada* is a testimony to it, as its contents largely focus on making the Sikh way of life distinct from the Hindu ritualistic practices.[5] However, after the 'western contact' in the late nineteenth century, the changing socio-political factors gave rise to a new campaign to redefine the Sikh identity, as culturally distinct from that of the Hindus. Different scholars[6] attribute different causes for the change. The main causes that were identified proved to be:

> . . . . the competition between Sikh and Hindu middle classes to corner jobs and shrinking economic resources in trade and agriculture, the foundation of Singh Sabha and the Arya Samaj, powerful Sikh and Hindu socio-religious movements respectively; efforts to gain greater representation in legislatures, and finally the divide and rule policy of the British administration ( Oberoi 1990: 138).

The demand for the democratic control over the management of their gurdwaras and ending the non-Sikh practices of *mahants* who ruled the gurdwaras as their feudal possessions, and the emphasis on Khalsa form, and

Sri Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji Elibrary NamdhariElibrary@gmail.com

spread of Punjabi in Gurmukhi script were some of the predominant issues in the early twentieth century. Parallel to these processes, the Hindu revivalist movement namely the Arya Samaj was gaining popularity under the leadership of Swami Dayanand. Initially

> . . . Swami Dayanand's programme synchronised with the reformative programme of the Sikh reformers. As a result, the latter welcomed Swami Dayanand and arranged his discourses in the Sikh shrines. However, these cordial relations didn't last long. By 1880's several issues cropped up which arrayed the Sikh reformers against the followers of Swami Dayanand. The most sensitive issue was the vilification of the Sikh gurus and Sikhism in the *Satyarth Prakash* . . . They [Sikh reformers] repeatedly asked Swami Dayanand's followers to delete the obnoxious passages from the *Satyarth Prakash*. But to his followers it was sacrosanct . . . They argued that what the Sikh gurus preached was a simplified version of the vedic philosophy . . . that the Sikh gurus as well as their followers had been practicing the Brahmanical rituals and ceremonies of birth and naming, marriage and death. Furthermore, they contended that the mode of eating and drinking and celebrations of festivals by the Sikhs were akin to those of the Hindus. On the other hand, the Sikh reformers vehemently denied and stated '*Ham Hindu Nahin*', they were not Hindus. They launched a fierce polemic against the Arya Samajists and initiated a "systematic campaign to purge their faith of religious diversity as well as what they saw as Hindu assertions and Brahmanical stranglehold over their rituals". (Singh, Joginder 1998: 19-20)

The result was the formation of a distinct cultural identity of the Sikhs, under the leadership of a new body of Sikhs called *Tat Khalsa*.[7] The *Tat Khalsa* standardised a new ritual code of conduct or rahit which in effect was antagonistic to the existing (Hindu) set of rituals. The elaborate Hindu *rites de passage* of birth, marriage, and death were attacked as they were either deemed superstitious or superfluous. In 1908, a separate marriage ceremony for the Sikhs called "*Anand Karaj*" was legalised. The threat of a systematic and organised evangelism of the Christian missionaries was another potential factor which led to the beginning of Singh Sabha Movement. Therefore, when announcement of four Sikh students' conversion to Christianity was made at Amritsar in 1893, the traditional leadership founded the first Singh Sabha at Amritsar in the same year to reorient the Sikh community to the new cultural milieu. The catalyst in the evolution of a distinct Sikh identity had been a vernacular tract titled '*Hum Hindu Nahin Hain*' (We are not Hindus) by Kahan Singh Nabha in 1897. Thus the relationship between the *Tat Khalsa* and the Arya Samaj became hostile after a brief period of harmony, and Sikhs initiated a Gurdwara Reform Movement to get back the control of their shrines which had been taken over by *mahants*. This movement successfully culminated in the passing of the Gurdwara Act of 1920 and also the formation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. Following this, the ritualistic code of the Sikhs was formalised into what is today known as the '*Sikh Rahit Maryada*'. This not only segregated the Hindu and Sikh communities but also led to a seemingly permanent division of the Sikhs into two parallel traditions,

Sri Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji Elibrary NamdhariElibrary@gmail.com

i.e. the *Khalsa* tradition followed by the baptised Sikhs (*amritdharis*) and the Sikh tradition followed by non-*Khalsa* Sikhs (*sahajdharis*).

Apart from the socio-religious movements, demographic factors also sharpened this divide. Among these was the inclusion of 'Sikh' as a separate religious category in the Census. The Census Report of 1855 did not give separate statistics for the Sikhs because they were included among the Hindus. Even when they were finally recognised as distinct, the Census criteria for determining their identity were very vague. Generally only *keshdharis* and non-smoking Sikhs were enumerated as Sikhs in the Census by the British Government. This was rectified in 1911, and *sahajdharis* also identified themselves as Sikhs. This brought in its wake, on the one hand, a heightened awareness in both Hindus and Sikhs of being separate religious categories, and on the other, activated the *sahajdharis* to resist efforts by *Tat Khalsa* to homogenise the Sikhs into an imaginary primordial identity.

> Earlier Hindus were not an alien people but a people from whom they [Sikhs] had sprung, to who they had married their sons and daughters, with whom they had shared their agonies and ecstasies, and whose friendship had been a part of their experience of growing up, as it had been of generations before them. (Singh *c.f.* O'Connell 1990: 408)

By now the Arya Samaj movement's denigration of Sikh philosophy and scriptures and a corresponding emphasis on the use of the Hindi language and script, had gained an impressive following in Punjab at the expense of the cohesiveness between the two communities. But these strains – not too dissimilar to those experienced by different social groupings in other societies had been kept in check by the maturity and magnanimity of the communities concerned. The language controversy and the reorganisation of the States after independence were to prove more corrosive. It eventually was to erode the traditional Hindu-Sikh ethos in Punjab. For Sikhs the misgivings were to arise in the post-partition years, as they saw with dismay their Hindu friends, neighbours, and relations disown their own mother tongue Punjabi.

During the traumatic experience of partition, the threat was jointly perceived by Hindus as well as Sikhs from the Muslim community.

> At that time [Sikhs] were a persecuted people from whom not only Nankana Sahib, the birth place of Guru Nanak, and other Gurdwara in Pakistan were snatched away, but were also made to run for their lives across the border. Punjabi Hindus also suffered a similar fate (Singh 1994: 108).

However, during the Akali Movement and the Khalistan Movement, the threat perceived by the Hindu community was from within rather than from without. Nirmal Singh writes that a call was given by the Punjabi Hindu communal leadership during the 1951 and 1961 Census to the Hindus to declare Hindi as their mother tongue and for opposition to *Gurumukhi* on religious grounds which fuelled the Sikh separatist movement. Sikhs were denied a separate

Sri Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji Elibrary NamdhariElibrary@gmail.com

electorate or a separate Punjabi Suba with Sikh numerical dominance, when the Indian constitution was formulated.

Nirmal Singh (1994) further says that the problem got aggravated due to certain economic developments in the 1960's. On one side were the entrenched forces of bourgeoisie development of a mixed Hindu-Sikh complexion sailing under the banner of secularism, unity, and integrity of the country, and on the other the upper strata of the beneficiaries of green revolution, of exclusive Sikh complexion, relying on a communal identity and believing in the theory of inseparability of politics from religion, *miri* from *piri*. The Akalis gradually turned the demand for a Punjabi Suba into a major socio-political concern.

## II

With the establishment of the Khalsa by the tenth guru in 1699, many new traditions were born, e.g. *Panj-Pyaras*, *Amrit*, the Five K's, *Sarbat Khalsa*, and *Gurmat*. These institutions have re-shaped the Sikh tradition and identity over the years. From Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind, from Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule to the Gurdwara Reform Movement, from Nirankari Movement to the Khalistan Movement, from Operation Blue Star to Tercentenary celebrations, the Sikh identity has constantly been in the process of redefinition. This has largely been due to the evolutionary character of *rahit* itself. The religious tenets laid down by Guru Nanak during the Bhakti Movement were liberal, egalitarian and modern. The earliest Sikh institutions of *Gurdwara*, *sangat* and *langar* are examples of this. Many of the injunctions in the contemporary standardised form of *rahit* also point to the flexible approach of the *rahit*. I would like to mention here that *rahit* has three elements according to Mcleod (1989). The first element consists of fundamental doctrines which an orthodox Sikh of the Khalsa is expected to affirm. The second element includes rules for personal behaviour, while the third consists of orders for the conduct of Khalsa ceremonies.

### *Sikh Rahit Maryada*: Canon and responses to modernity

The contemporary *Sikh Rahit Maryada* is published by the SGPC, and the references below are extracted from the translated English version of the original in Gurmukhi. A look at *rahit* divulges several principles of Sikhism that can best be described as embodiment of the western modernity. For example,

*Rahit* eschews superstition and rituals.

Such practices as arti with burning incense and lamps; offerings of eatables to Guru Granth Sahib, burning lights, beating of gongs etc., is contrary to gurmat.[8]

Sri Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji Elibrary NamdhariElibrary@gmail.com

The *rahit* also states that

> pressing the legs of the cot on which the Guru Granth Sahib is installed, rubbing nose against walls and on platforms, held sacred, or massaging these, placing water below the Guru Granth Sahib's seat… are irreligious, self-willed egotism, contrary to *gurmat.* [9]

*Rahit* is also very receptive to the idea of wearing shoes while taking Guru Granth Sahib from one place to another. No rigid observance of rule need to be entertained then. There is an innate flexibility and rationality to the *rahit*. The rahit prescribes that

> every Sikh should take the hukum of the Guru Granth Sahib in the ambrosial (early) hours of the morning before taking meal. If he/she fails to do that, he/she should read or listen to reading from the guru granth some time during the day. If he/she cannot do that either, during travel etc., or owing to any other impediment, he/she should not give in to a feeling of guilt.[10]

The *rahit* is quite flexible and hence no sense of guilt and need for its atonement is levied on the devotee.

> Not believing in caste or descent, untouchability, magic, spells, incantations, omens, auspicious times, days and occasions, influence of stars, horoscopic dispositions, *shradh* (ritual serving of food to priests for the salvation of ancestor worship), *Khian* (ritual serving of food to priests, Brahmins on the lunar anniversaries of the death of an ancestor), *pind* (offering of funeral barley cakes to the deceased's relatives), *patal* (ritual donating of food in the belief that that would satisfy the hunger of departed soul), *diva* (the ceremony of keeping an oil lamp lit for 360 days after the death of a person in the belief that it lights the path of the deceased), ritual funeral acts, *hom* (lighting of ritual fire and pouring intermittently clarified butter, food grains etc. into it for propitiating gods for the fulfilment of a purpose), *jag* (religious ceremony involving presentation of oblation), *tarpan* (libation), *Sikha-sut* (keeping a tuft of hair on the head and wearing thread), *bhadan* (shaving of head on the death of a parent), fasting on new or full moon or other days; wearing of frontal marks on the forehead, wearing of thread, wearing of a necklace of the piece of *tulsi* stalk, veneration of any graves, of monuments erected to honour the memory of a deceased person or of cremation sites, idoltary and such like superstitious observances.[11]

*Rahit* is also liberal with regard to the rules of conduct for women, for example:

> It is not proper for a Sikh woman to wear veil or keep her face hidden by veil or cover. It further says that a Sikh man and woman should enter wedlock without giving thought to the prospective spouse's caste and descent.[12]

Child marriage is also a taboo for the Sikhs. Similarly

> consulting horoscopes for determining which day or date is auspicious or otherwise for fixing the day of the marriage is a sacrilege. Any day that the parties find suitable by mutual consultation should be fixed.[13]

For a widow, the *rahit* prescribes, 'She may, if she so wishes, finding a match suitable for her to remarry. For a Sikh man whose wife has died, similar ordinance obtains' (p. 29).

Sri Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji Elibrary NamdhariElibrary@gmail.com

Regarding funeral rites, it says:

> . . . where arrangements for cremation cannot be made, there should be no qualm about the body being immersed in flowing water or disposed of in any other manner. . . . As to the time of cremation, no consideration as to whether it should take place during day or night should weigh. . . . *Adh marg* (the ceremony of breaking the pot used for bathing the dead bodies amid doleful cries half way towards the cremation ground), organised lamentation by women, *foorhi* (sitting on a straw mat in mourning for a certain period), *diva* (keeping an oil lamp lit for 360 days after the death in the belief that that will light the path of the deceased), *pind* (ritual donation of lumps of rice, flour, oat flour, or solidified milk for ten days after death), *kriya* (concluding the funeral proceedings ritualistically, serving meals and making offerings by way of *shradh*), *budha marna* (waving of whisk, over the hearse of an old person's dead body and decorating the hearse with festoons), etc. are contrary to the approved code. So too is the picking of burnt bones from the ashes of the pyre for immersing in Ganga, at Patalpuri (Kiratpur), at Kartarpur Sahib or at any other such place.[14]

There is a code regarding the voluntary service also. *Langar*, one of the most important institutions of Sikhism stands for

> guru's (free)–kitchen–cum eating-house. The philosophy behind the guru's kitchen is two-fold; to provide training to the Sikhs in voluntary service and to help banish all distinction of high and low, touchable and untouchable from the Sikhs' minds. No discrimination on grounds of the country of origin, colour, caste or religion must be made while making people sit in rows for eating.[15]

The above excerpts have been selectively cited to illustrate the embodiment of elements of modernity, i.e., liberty, equality and rationality in the Sikh canon. Guru Nanak, the founder of the faith raised a movement against domination by any one communal ruler, against superstitious rituals and showed people the way to lead a life of true freedom; freedom from the shackles of ignorance, fear, and casteism. The *rahit* proclaims to show Sikhs a path, free of the ritualistic bondage.

## III

### Hybridisation and heterodoxy: Practice of *rahit* in the everyday life

A careful look at the Sikh code of conduct would reveal its flexibility as well as rigidity. The modern *rahit* simultaneously transcends the Hindu orthodox rituals which Guru Nanak set out to abolish in the 15th century on the one hand, and re-invents new ones of its own in the early 20th century, ostensibly, on the basis of original *rahitnamas.*

> The rahit-namas are manuals of Rahit principles, spelling out what a Khalsa Sikh may do and what he should avoid. They are, in other words, works which claim to record the Rahit as it was delivered by Guru Gobind Singh at the founding of the Khalsa order…There are several rahit-namas, of which deserve close analysis. Two are attributed to Nand Lal, and one each to

Sri Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji Elibrary NamdhariElibrary@gmail.com

> Prahilad Rai (or Prahilad Singh), Chaupa Singh, Desa Singh, and Daya Singh. In Addition to these there are later rahit-namas such as the Prem Sumarag and two rahit-namas set in Sau-sakhian. An additional work, also attributed to Nand Lal and commonly known as Prashan-uttar, contains very little material of the kind contained in a standard rahit-nama and may have been recorded before the actual founding of the Khalsa. (McLeod 2004: 34).

The everyday practices of Sikhs show a curious hybridisation of these two which in a way is a continuation of the earlier pluralist tradition. Many rituals prohibited by the code of conduct are also observed by many Sikhs. Sikhs are known to consult astrologers for horoscopes reading before opening a new business and for striking business deals, for choosing name of a new born; for career and marriage prospects, etc. It is a common enough practice for Sikhs to perform last rites like collection of funeral remains and immersing them at *Bias* and *Kiratpur*. The practice is called *phul chugna* in Punjabi. Such funeral practices are quite common for Sikhs in crematoriums. It is popular for Sikh women to violate the code of conduct with regard to jewellery. They pierce their ears and adorn themselves with earrings and other jewellery. A practice of veil also existed amongst some rural women although it has declined tremendously.

From the standpoint of Akal Takht the *rahit maryada* is sacred and any violation of its principles is tantamount to heterodoxy. The orthodox intelligentsia's view is not very different but its reasons for believing so are based on a textual understanding of their religion. This radical intelligentsia, therefore, derives its spiritual guidance from the reading of the holy granth because the commands of various *rahitnamas* are not consistent. The understanding of liberal intellectuals takes a historical view and recognizes a variety of ritual practices, ceremonies and beliefs amongst Sikhs which are akin to Hindu and Muslim modes of worship. The difference between radical and liberal view is not purely a difference of religion and community as religion cannot be considered to be organised around *rahit* or the scripture alone, even though both command equal authority. Religion is a system of beliefs and a mode of organisation as well and religious leadership must not be dismissive of the everyday understanding of religion of believers. The question, therefore, arises: to what extent the everyday religious practices of Sikhs embody the virtues enshrined in the *rahit*?

It is widely accepted that keeping hair un-shorn is a general command in the *rahit* for all the followers of Sikh religion. Yet in practice, non-*keshdharis* strongly identify themselves as Sikhs on the basis of their belief in the text and gurus. This brings us back to the conflict between *keshdharis* and non-*keshdharis*. However this is not the same as the distinction between *amritdharis* (baptised/*khalsa* Sikhs) and *sahajdharis* (non-baptised/slow adopter). Confusion prevails with regard to the identity of people who are not *khalsa* Sikhs. McLeod, while explaining these complexities about the question of Sikh identity writes that the distinction between *amritdharis* and

Sri Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji Elibrary NamdhariElibrary@gmail.com

*sahajdharis*[16] has several nuances which may not be apparent to a casual observer. He stresses the need to have a separate designation for *keshdharis* who are not *amritdharis* and for *keshdharis* who are *sahajdharis*. Sahajdharis who are not *keshdharis* are referred to as *Mona* Sikhs (i.e. someone with shorn hair). Although there is no clear consensus on the definition of a Sikh, the general observation is that the definition by the orthodox clergy considers only *amritdharis* or *khalsa* as Sikhs while it does make some concession for keshdharis. For instance, SGPC doesn't insist that one has to be a *khalsa* but holds that anyone who violates the code of requirement of *kes* (non-*keshdharis*) and anyone whose parents do not have *kes* is not a Sikh and therefore discredits his/her claim to get admission in professional colleges run by SGPC as minority institutions (Judge and Kaur 2010).

In their self-definitions, all non-*keshdhari* Sikhs consider themselves to be Sikhs despite not following *rahit* in its entirety. They may or may not be *sahajdharis, i.e.* those who choose to selectively adopt certain injunctions while ignoring others. They continue to ignore the canon underscored in *Sikh Rahit Maryada*. Earlier in the twentieth century during the forties and fifties, the effect of returning NRI (Non-Resident Indian) Sikhs had diluted these differences somewhat.[17] In the decades of seventies and eighties, the interpretation of the *rahit* by the baptised clergy assumed fundamentalist orientation due to the ongoing *Khalistan* Movement and differences between *amritdharis* and non-*amritdharis* sharpened during this period. The aspirations for a separate homeland in a section of the Sikh diaspora played a key role in this. The questions of Sikh identity now got complex with the introduction of a separate Sikh ethnicity. The fundamentalist speeches of Bhindranwale provoked many non-*keshdhari* young men to undergo the initiation ceremony and keep their hair unshorn. Many *sahajdharis* grew their hair and beards without taking the *amrit*. If the pre-Blue Star period saw a strong tendency amongst Sikhs to keep hair unshorn, the post-Blue Star anti-Sikh riots in Delhi impelled many of them to support shorn hair. The post-Blue Star period also saw the emergence of what I call a 'two-in-one' appearance. By this, I refer to the shorn hair of head with trimmed beards whereby one could switch one's religious identity by wearing or removing the turban. The young men found it very convenient to keep their hair shorn and they did not grow it back after the militancy was rooted out of Panjab. Many even went clean-shaven. This in effect meant that a significant section of the Sikh youth who was earlier *kesdhari* did not adhere to the most significant canon of the *rahit* which disallows a Sikh to remove or cut his body hair in any way and prescribes turban for Sikh men. Many young women from Sikh families did not find the prospect of marrying a turbaned young man very appealing, preferring instead to marry non-turbaned, clean-shaven men. By then, the homogenising influence of global media and consumerism had also made its inroads into a newly liberalising India and had a visible influence on the youth.

Sri Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji Elibrary NamdhariElibrary@gmail.com

Referring to such trends, the Akali leadership, however, noted that 'the panth was [is] in danger' from the 'growing threat of 'Hindufication' of Sikh minds and society' (Singh 1999: 13). There was a gross violation of the spirit of the *maryada* by both *sahajdharis* as well as *amritdharis*. The *maryada* prohibits discrimination on any basis especially caste and religion, while in practice caste was a reality of Sikhs and they preferred to marry within their own castes and sub-castes. The rhetoric of *rahit maryada* in the radical discourse was designed to exclude the Sikhs who did not confirm to the code. The *rahit* professed to derive its traditional authority from the original *rahitnamas* of the Sikh Gurus. However the *rahitnamas* of gurus never emphasised all the five K's, some of them were invented later. The observance or non-observance of the *maryada* has become symbolic of two parallel traditions, i.e. Sikhs and the *Khalsa* Sikhs. The followers of the *Khalsa* tradition are resentful of the *sahajdharis* as they feel that it has been three hundred years now, and their *sahaj* is not broken till now (Adhikari 1983: 14). 'How long is this *sahaj*?' they question.

## Concluding remarks

It can be easily surmised that *khalsa* Sikhs constitute one monolithic category of Sikhs while the *keshdharis, sehajdharis,* and *mona* Sikhs can be said to be further sub-groups within the second larger category of non-*khalsa* Sikhs. The multiple interpretations of *rahit* by this plurality of Sikh sub-groups brings us back to the question (earlier put forth by McLeod and others) – *who is a Sikh*? If *rahit* and its everyday practice were taken to be the criterion for identifying a Sikh, nobody can be identified as a Sikh because *khalsa* Sikhs are also known to practice *kureht* (apostasy) even though they may be adorning five Ks. The empirical understanding points towards the multiplicity of practices and ways of keeping hair, beards and turbans and co-existence of several modes of outer appearance of Sikhs that keep changing. This calls for taking note of pluralities in appearance and form in defining Sikh identity to avoid the controversies and conflicts over definition of a Sikh. The supremacy of *'kes'* and *'amrit'* in identifying a Sikh is misrepresentative and excludes a vast number of people who believe, profess and claim themselves to be Sikhs.

### NOTES

1. *http://www.firstpost.com/india/bargari-village-holy-book-sacrilege-punjab-police-arrest-2-brothers-suspect-australian-connection-2476668.html*
2. *http://www.hindustantimes.com/punjab/akal-takht-revokes-pardon-to-dera-head-gurmeet-ram-rahim/story-pUd4GpRu9tDkO9VBwbzKsK.html*
3. See J.S. Grewal's "*Recent Debates in Sikh Studies: An Assessment*". Manohar.2011.
4. Also see Harjot Oberoi's article in Joseph O Connell. 1994
5. See the standard *Sikh Reht Maryada*, Dharam Parchar Committee: SGPC, Amritsar. 1997.

Sri Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji Elibrary NamdhariElibrary@gmail.com

6. Some of these scholars are Kenneth Jones, Richard Fox, N.G. Barrier, J.S.Grewal, N.G. Barrier, Joginder Singh, and Patwant Singh.

7. *Tat Khalsa*, originally *Tatt Khalsa* meaning "ready". Khalsa was a band of followers of Banda Bahudar. *See* the *Encyclopedia of Sikhism,* edited by Harbans Singh, 199. Vol. IV. (S-V). PP. 326-327.

8. See the *Sikh Reht Maryada: The Code of Sikh Conduct & Conventions.* Dharam Parchar Committee: SGPC, Amritsar 1997. (English Version). P.13.

9. *ibid*. Ch. IV, Article V, p. 13.

10. *ibid.*

11. *ibid*. Ch. X, Article XVI, p.22.

12. *ibid*.

13. *ibid*. Ch. XI, Article XVII, p.26.

14. *ibid*. Ch. XI, Article XIX, p.30-31.

15. *ibid*. Ch. VIII, Article XII, p.20.

16. The term *sahajdhari* is a compound of *sahaj* and *dhari*. During the period of Sikh Gurus, *sahaj* was used in a theological context, to connote a state of mystic consciousness, and *dhari* meant one who takes upon, assumes, or adapts to something. Thus all Sikhs could be *sahajdharis.* A distinction between *sahajdharis* and *amritdharis* Sikhs began during the time of the tenth guru when a section of the Sikhs was elected to become *amritdharis.* During the Singh Sabha period, the word *sahajdhari* took on an ethnic meaning since the baptism by the double-edge sword (*Khande-da-amrit*) was emphasised to become an identifiable member of the Khalsa. Total commitment to a prescribed lifestyle was required of all Sikhs who were required to adhere to the Reht Maryada evolved by the Singh Sabha leaders and promulgated by the SGPC. Those who fulfilled the requirements were accepted for baptism while other aspirants were asked to wait and prepare. Those in waiting or others who on their own considered themselves not yet fully prepared for baptism were then called *sahajdhari* ( moderate –in-adopting). While in waiting, the aspirants were often initiated by pahul (baptism of water sanctified by the Guru's touch, circumambulating the Guru Granth Sahib, while chanting Ardas, Sikh Prayer, akin to the custom started at the time of Guru Amar Das). The contemporary usage of *sahajdharis* is derived more by contrasting it with the *Khalsa*.

17. By 1920, most of the preferred Sikh countries of destination had erected legal barriers to further South Asian immigration and most countries lost Sikh population. The return migrant mostly had his hair un-shorn, played a significant role in redefining the question of Sikh identity. *See* Verne A. Dusenbery.1989. "A Century of Sikhs beyond Punjab" in N. Gerald barrier and Verne A. Dusenbery. (Eds.). *The Sikh Diaspora*. Delhi: Chanakya Publications. PP. 1-23.

## REFERENCES

Adhikari, Gautam.

1983 "Orthodoxy *versus* Modernisation: Punjab Highlights the larger Tussle". *The Times of India.* October 19. P. 14.

Connell, Joseph O' *et al.*

1990 (Eds.). *Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century.* P. 137. New Delhi: Manohar.

Sri Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji Elibrary NamdhariElibrary@gmail.com

Dusenbery, Verne A.

1989 "A Century of Sikhs beyond Punjab" in N. Gerald Barrier and Verne A. Dusenbery (eds.).*The Sikh Diaspora*. Delhi: Chanakya Publications. Pp. 1-23.

Grewal, J.S.

2011 *Recent Debates in Sikh Studies: An Assessment*. New Delhi: Manohar.2011.

Joginder Singh

1998 *The Sikh Resurgence*. New Delhi: National Book Organisation. Pp. 19-20.

Judge, P.S. and Manjit Kaur

2010 "The Politics of Sikh Identity: Understanding Religious Exclusion", *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 59:3. Pp. 345-366.

McLeod, W.H.

1989 *Who is a Sikh? The Problem of Sikh Identity.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

McLeod, W. H.

2004 "Keynote Speech: Researching the Rahit" in Singh, Pashaura and N. G. Barrier. (Eds.). 2004. *Sikhism and History*. New Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press.

Oberoi, Harjot

1990 'From Ritual to Counter-Ritual: Rethinking the Hindu Sikh Question 1884-1915' in Joseph O' Connell et.al.(ed.). *Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century.* P.137. New Delhi : Manohar.

Oberot, Harjot.

1997 [1994]. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in Sikh Tradition*. New Delhi: Oxford.

Singh, Gurharpal

2000 *Ethnic Conflict in India: A Case Study of Punjab*. New York: St. Martin Press.

Singh, Khushwant

1999 "Throw Politics out of Religion". *The Times of India*, Feb. 19. P. 13.

Singh, Nirmal

1994 "Ideological Aspects of Contemporary Sikh revivalism" in V.D. Chopra (ed.). *Religious Fundamentalism in Asia*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House. P. 113.

Singh, Pashaura

2004 "Sikh Identity in the Light of History" in Pashaura Singh and N.G.Barrier (eds.) *Sikhism and History*. New Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press. Pp: 77-110.

Singh, Pashaura and N.G. Barrier

2004 (Eds.). *Sikhism and History*. New Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press.

Sri Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji Elibrary NamdhariElibrary@gmail.com